

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, January 23, 2022
3rd Sunday after Epiphany /Year C
First Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Gospel Reading: Luke 4:14-21
Sermon Title: “Name It & Claim It”

Theme

Near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, he visits his hometown of Nazareth. In the words of Isaiah, he states and claims his identity, purpose, and mission.

Text

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Sermon

During the Season of Epiphany, the readings, especially the Gospel Readings, are meant to be epiphanies, revelations of God's glory through Jesus Christ as he began his public ministry. Let's look at today's Gospel Reading and see what the Spirit reveals about Jesus Christ today.

This passage demands a brief review to understand what is going on. Having just celebrated his birth, we know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but that was not the hometown of his father and mother. Bethlehem was where his parents *had to go* because of the census that was being taken that required everyone to go to their ancestral homes. Since Joseph was from the line of David, he and Mary had to go to Bethlehem, the city of David.

After Jesus' birth, an angel of the Lord told Joseph to go to Egypt because, out of jealousy, Herod was going to kill all the newborn Jewish baby boys. After Herod died, the angel of the Lord told Joseph that it was safe to return to the land of Israel, and so they, Mary and Joseph and their child, Jesus, decided to settle in Nazareth of Galilee, although Isaiah (Matthew 2:23 & Isaiah 11:1) foretold this 700 years before. So Nazareth is where Jesus grew up (Matthew 2).

We also know that Jesus was about thirty years old when he started his public ministry (Luke 3:23). Was Jesus in Nazareth until then? I don't know. Bible scholars speculate, but that is all it is. Back to today's passage.

Whenever a text begins, "Then," I am always curious about what just happened. Maybe you are the same way.

The first thirteen verses of Luke chapter four is the Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness. Having successfully navigated that trap, Luke began the passage we have today with

¹⁴**Then** Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

First, note that this indicates that he was successful in Galilee, a territory, not a particular town. Nazareth is a particular town in the territory of Galilee.

Second, note that a careful read of the passage indicates that after his Temptation, he went to Galilee (a territory) and though the details of what he did there are missing, Luke told us that he "was praised by everyone."

Third, note that Jesus hadn't called any disciples yet. That didn't begin until chapter five. At this point in the story of Jesus and his public ministry, we might say that he is flying solo; going rogue.

And in verse sixteen, thirty-year-old Jesus of Nazareth returned to his hometown. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue to worship and pray, and on this day was given the honor of teaching.

Finally to the content of what he said, Luke wrote

He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And that is where the text for today ends.

I was never a thespian, but I hope I was able to bring a bit of the drama for you.

Next weekend it will become clear that the citizens of Nazareth recognized him, knew him, even asked if this is not Joseph's son, but that was the high watermark of the day. After that, they turned on him.

All Jesus did was quote Isaiah and tell those in attendance that that scripture had been fulfilled in him on that day. Now, we 21st century Christians know how the

story turned out. This passage pretty much describes what Jesus did for the next three years. He *"Named It and Claimed It."*

This is what I think this part of the story is all about: Even though his fellow citizens were Jews and should have been familiar with this passage from Isaiah, they didn't want to hear it *from him*. They are going to have to get over that.

As long as I've been in ministry, I have known people to pick and choose their way through scripture choosing what they believe and what they discard.

Were any of you fans of Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*? Many years ago they had a recurring skit about this guy named Bob who was intrigued by the tax-exempt status of the church, so he started his own church called the Church of Bob, where he practiced Bobism. For several weeks in a row, Keillor interviewed Bob about his church and his beliefs. Bob hadn't really given doctrine or theology or any of the -ologies any thought. He just wanted everything about his life to be tax-exempt. Well, that isn't how a life of faith works. We don't get to decide we are God or define our own religion or pick and choose our way through Christian theology. Jesus came into Nazareth and spoke the truth in love to his townsfolk, the Nazarenes, and they have two options: accept it or reject it. We'll have to wait till next week to find out what their answer was.

"But Pastor," some of you will say, "You don't believe in a manifestation of evil known as the Devil even though he is mentioned throughout scripture and even the previous chapter from Luke." And you are right. That is my position, and it comes after studying scripture and doing ministry with people for nearly 30 years. And let me say here that while I do not believe in the Devil, I do believe in evil, I have stuck my foot in it plenty of times.

When it comes to the character and nature of God and God revealed in Jesus Christ, as revealed in scripture, I am completely on board. For nearly 25 years of ordained ministry, I have studied and taught God's word, the Bible, and I have been nourished and inspired by it, but I have also been corrected and admonished by it. Honestly, there are parts of it that my sinful self would like to rebel against, but that is not the faithful response. We simply don't get to pick and choose our way through it. It is the revelation of God in Christ. It is where we learn what God's expectations are. How can we achieve God's expectations if we don't know what

they are? All this God does for us out of God's great love, grace, and mercy. And about God's great love, God loves us so much that God gives us the ability to reject the nourishment and inspiration, the correction and admonishment.

We Lutherans believe that God's word, the Bible, is the inspired word of God, and by that, we mean that it is a true expression of what God wants us to know about God's self. And while there always will be some who focus on the do's and do not's of scripture, they exist because we need to be hemmed in – for our own good. God knows us better than we know ourselves. And even when there are times when we mess up, the Bible contains the Good News of Jesus Christ – the author of grace. The Samaritan women at the well, Mary Magdalene, Zacchaeus – all made it into the canon of scripture not because they were sinners, but because they were forgiven and freed by Jesus Christ our Lord.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Two stories will help illustrate what I am saying: I love my mother. She had five kids and she, not my father, was the judge and executioner in our home. I have distinct memories of times when we made her so angry I thought one of two of us was going to die. To this day, I'm surprised we all made it. Do you know why we made it? She loved us, and wanted us to do right – can you relate to that? Then maybe you can relate to what I am saying about scripture.

The athletic director and head football coach at the high school I attended had this plague on his wall. It was an old shoe with a badly worn toe. Underneath the shoe, it said, "The two rules of the Oxford Club: 1) The coach is always right. 2) If the coach is wrong, see rule number one."

That same thing could be applied to God in Christ. As the creation, we need to recognize that the creator has the ultimate and final word. We don't get to hear Jesus read scripture and say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." and then debate his character. Especially we who say we are his faithful followers. Scripture was then and is now our handbook for godly living.

When it comes to the character and nature of God and God revealed in Jesus Christ, as revealed in scripture, I am completely on board. You should be too. It's fun to debate the adiaphora – the stuff that doesn't matter. But when it comes to Jesus, the

only conversation I want to be involved in is how lovely, how graceful, how beautiful he is. And if there is any good that I have accomplished, it is because of him who nourishes and inspires, and also corrects, and admonishes.

Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the gift of the Bible,
for its psalms and poems, myths and stories, histories, teachings, and prophecies.
May your Holy Spirit who called out those ancient writings
continue to call us today,
that our lives may reflect the first sermon of Jesus,
our crucified and risen Christ,
who brings good news to the poor;
releases to the captive;
gives sight to the blind;
and lets the oppressed go free.
In his name we pray. Amen